

Getting the Sword Out of the Stone: leadership through presence by
Diana Durham

The stories of King Arthur and the Round Table have long pulled at human hearts because they touch on the longing for great leadership and the power of collective agreement. Written down between the 12th and 15th centuries, this myth is relatively recent, carrying the unconscious but symbolically expressed dream of an extraordinary kind of aligned power. President Kennedy, who knew how to articulate and embody deep dreams and aspirations, consciously evoked the court of Camelot to help inspire Americans to feel that they were part of something extraordinary and were here to serve a higher purpose than mere self-interest ". a new generation of Americans..".

After Kennedy's assassination it seemed as if this dream evaporated. Certainly today it is difficult to imagine a president inspiring us to 'ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country'. In so many public arenas leadership seems to have deteriorated into the ability to be 'smart', generally defined as winning at all costs while making as much money as possible into the bargain.

But the stories Kennedy evoked are part of a myth, and myth is more durable than visionary dreams. Myth symbolizes or points to what is real. The King Arthur myth illuminates a potential for leadership in us all, both individually and collectively, that is very much alive and available.

This leadership potential finds its heart in a particular quality of *presence*. Kennedy embodied this presence - a quality of aliveness that inspires and quickens others. This quality of presence is extremely effective. It was no coincidence that, tragically short though it was, Kennedy's presidency was so full of achievement - heading off the Cuban missile crisis (the closest the world has ever come to nuclear war); supporting the Civil Rights movement at a crucial stage after the violence sparked in Alabama; playing a key role in implementing the space program that ultimately landed a man on the moon.

And so, at a time that can seem a bit like a collective dark night of the soul as the policy and war in Iraq founders into a quagmire, and in the aftermath of the multiple scandals in the corporate world - Enron, Tyco, Worldcom, etc, I want to evoke the beautiful symbolism of the King Arthur myth again. This time not just to inspire us with a dream, but to show how to access this quality of presence in ourselves.

The King Arthur and grail quest legends can help us do this because their symbolism encodes the steps involved in leading through presence. At the same time these myths also show *why* this kind of leadership is the most effective in bringing creative change - potentially in any setting - and *how* it is key to ushering in a new, collective paradigm of leadership. This is the promise of a true round table that the brief 'reign' of Kennedy awoke in us.

Disentangling from Structure - Freeing the Sword

Presence is the quality that allows us to stay fluid and in balance, and that therefore makes it possible for us both to expose and withstand the pressures of our own and other peoples' belief structures and agendas and therefore create the space to think in new ways to find the right course of action. In fact the hallmark of leadership through presence is the ability to avoid becoming bogged down in belief structures of any kind - even 'good' ones.

The movie '13 Days' reconstructs the pressures coming to bear on Kennedy during the Cuban missile crisis. He meets with the Pentagon hawks, bristling not only with military expertise and nuclear strategies but (many anyway) with the unshakable conviction that they needed to strike first. Kennedy simply listens, thanks them and leaves. He counterpoises their weighty (yet insane) arguments to embark upon nuclear war with his own presence.

The film shows how he neither ignores the advice from the various experts, nor gets drawn into it. Instead his leadership is able to create a space in which, with the help of his advisors, he starts to realize that Krushchev himself does not wish to go to war, but is partially hostage to his own military. In other words, Krushchev's situation parallels Kennedy's. This understanding allows Kennedy to navigate through the tangle of mutual brinkmanship and de-escalate the situation. This ability to disentangle ourselves from structure is beautifully symbolized in the myth when Arthur draws the sword Excalibur from the stone.

Written in gold letters around the sword is a prophecy that whoever can free it is king of all England. The sword represents our power, our leadership potential, and in order to lead we have to be able to free our selves from, or cease investing our power in, the structures and pressures that surround us.

Many stronger, mightier and more experienced knights than Arthur (in fact at this point, Arthur is not even a knight) had tried in vain to wrench the sword out. Yet Arthur was the true king - he was the true king by birth, but his ability to draw the sword out demonstrated that he was the true king by character as well because he was not seeking power for himself. In fact he was trying to find a sword for his brother Kay, whom he was serving as squire.

The other knights wanted to be king and sought both sword and title in order for those things to confer authority on them. But Arthur, by his presence, already had authority so the sword came to him and with it, the kingdom.

Arthur is ingenuous, innocent. When his (foster) father Sir Hector reproaches him for taking the sword out, and tells him to put it back, he obeys immediately. The quality of innocence implies some one who is agenda-less, who is not out for what he or she can get, not out to serve themselves, but to serve others, and ultimately, to serve the greater whole.

The older knights lusted for power - that was their motivation in straining to free the sword. And when this becomes the dominant motivation in any leader he or she is ultimately untrustworthy. Even though the quality of innocence is not sufficient on its own to make us leaders, it is the most important quality. Experience and skills can be added on, but there must be an untouchable part of us, a part that cannot be bought if we are going to be effective in the long-term.

The innocent, untouchable 'x' ingredient that I am calling presence means that a person cannot be controlled nor his or her actions predicted. It is a radical quality that threatens those who prefer the dictates of the status quo to be upheld. In his book 'Profiles in Courage' Kennedy weighed up the issues of "the way to get along is to go along." approach:

"... He {a Senator} cannot ignore the pressure groups, his constituents, his party, the comradeship of his colleagues, the needs of his family, his own pride in office, the necessity for compromise and the importance of remaining in office. He must judge for himself which path to choose, which step will most help or hinder the ideals to which he is committed. He realizes that once he begins to weigh each issue in terms of his chances for re-election, once he begins to compromise away his principle on one issue after another for fear that to do otherwise would halt his career and prevent further fights for principle, then he has lost the very freedom of conscience which justifies his continuance in office."

We have to be realistic in our awareness of and think strategically about the structures in which we must operate. But ultimately in order to lead, we cannot give them our power or our unquestioned allegiance.

Nowadays, with the advent of systems thinking and other developments in the field of leadership and business studies, there is a much more sophisticated understanding of the problems of leading in highly complex, global systems. In a ground-breaking book of the early 1990's ('The Fifth Discipline') MIT-based business luminary Peter Senge synthesized many of the leadership elements required to understand particularly the deeper, structural forces at play in large organizations and he included the domain of personal mastery.

Senge and his colleagues had recognized that limiting patterns of belief or unseen assumptions in management, for instance, could adversely impact a company's performance just as much as circumstantial adversities. In order, therefore, to be successful both in our personal lives and as individuals functioning in large and complex worlds, we need to become aware of the conditioning, mindsets and unconscious assumptions in ourselves that impede us, as well as the structural patterns of the systems we function in, and the way these two interact.

In some versions of the King Arthur story the sword is stuck - point down - in an anvil on top of a stone. Iron and stone are both hard, rigid materials and these two layers (one 'smaller' and closer in, one larger and further out) could represent our personal structures and the structures of the larger systems in which we function. When we free up in identity - draw the sword from the stone - and cease thinking of ourselves as products of or subject to these structures and at the same time become aware of them, the anvil and the stone turn into our kingdom. And we become the sovereign of our world. We are responsible for that world but no longer a prisoner of it.

The prophecy written around the sword said that whoever pulled it out would be king of 'all England' - and Arthur as King goes on to unite the kingdom of England for the first time. Up until his reign, it had been ravaged by wars from competing fiefdoms. It is often the case that while we remain hostage to structure, elements both in ourselves and our communities or organizations are pitted against each other instead of working together. But again, as we release our selves from the grip of unhelpful conditionings, and fill out our sense of identity, the warring aspects of ourselves and our worlds start to be understood as parts of a whole - a united, peaceable kingdom in which many things can flourish.

Radical though the quality of presence is in leadership, the ability to realistically and comprehensively size up the structures and systems in which one is operating, both personally and in our wider worlds, leads to a style of leadership characterized more by commonsense, moderation and perspective than by rash heroic acts. It is also a style of leadership that includes the contribution of others. The figure of Arthur is not renowned for acts of heroism but for founding the Order of the Knights of the Round Table.

When a leader genuinely has the service of the greater whole at heart, he or she always seeks to confer with and encourage the input of others. This kind of leadership creates, in other words, a round table. Even though leadership through presence cannot be pinned down or predicted, it is trustworthy. This leader is not interested in a stunning solo act but in drawing out the intelligence of the collective.

The Power of Collective Intelligence

The shape of the round table is revolutionary. It is not a hierarchy - a long narrow, rectangular table with King Arthur at the top. Arthur is king, but he has not placed himself at the center of things. The center of the table is empty. In some old manuscript illustrations it is hollow, like a doughnut. The empty space in the center represents the quality we are calling presence. And every one has equal access to this center space.

The round table with its open empty center space can symbolize in a more literal way the practice that many large scale businesses and institutions

now incorporate of group dialogue. Building on the insights of physicist David Bohm, William Isaacs, in affiliation with the Center for Organizational Learning (now renamed SOL) founded by Senge, pioneered much of this dialogue work in large-scale organizations and identified a phase of the dialogic process in which the group shifts from being a collection of 'parts' or separate individuals and starts thinking and functioning as a whole - as a collective.

Many other thought leaders are becoming interested in this phenomenon, with its potential for transcending conflict and myopic agendas. One participant described her experience:

"It was almost as if we were suddenly surrounded by {an} ambient energy that allowed each person to leap, inside of themselves, into a much vaster way of being..."

(excerpted from 'The Power of Collective Intelligence' *What Is Enlightenment* magazine May-July 2004)

In other words, the experience of the collective space amplified the individuals' awareness of their own presence. This syndrome is symbolized in the myth when the grail (which is a golden cup) appears suddenly one day at a banquet in Camelot and hovers magically in the hollow center of the round table.

The grail is covered in a cloth of white samite - a gauzy, semi-transparent material - so that the knights cannot see it clearly. As they watch, amazed, the grail passes around the table and serves each knight a taste of what he most desires before disappearing again.

The effect on the knights is electrifying. After tasting what the grail has to offer, each one stands in turn and vows to go on a quest to view the grail again, but this time 'directly' ie, without its covering of white samite. What the grail offers the knights is a taste of their own authentic presence, which is supremely satisfying.

We may get a taste of our authentic presence in a high-energy collective setting, but if we are going to know this experience directly in ourselves, without the amplifying effect of the group, we have to go on the quest to 'view the grail directly'. The grail symbolizes our heart - it is through the heart that we connect with the quality of presence.

Finding What Controls Us - Whom Does the Grail Serve?

On the quest the knights must not only find the grail again, but ask the question : Whom does the grail serve? Meaning, whom or what does our heart serve? What do we serve? This question goes to the core of leadership because it asks what is in control of us. Whatever our heart serves is what controls us.

Very often we think we are controlled by our circumstances. But what we are really controlled by is fear: fear that we cannot cope, fear that we are stuck, fear that we are powerless to change or affect those circumstances, or will risk too much if we do. In other words, we are convinced that our sword is firmly

stuck in the stone. The quest is our personal inward process of facing fear and therefore choosing what is going to control us. Is it fear, or presence? Do we have a price on our heads, or are we trustworthy?

Becoming clear about what controls us is what lies at the core of personal mastery. It is also where morality interfaces with strategy. The symbolism of the grail story therefore helps us understand the internal dynamics that allow us to connect to presence and that can turn us into a leader - no matter what our situation, no matter what our experience.

In the story the grail turns out to serve the Grail King, a venerable old man with pure white hair who lives in an inner room of the Grail Castle. The inner room represents the core of ourselves and the Grail King the fountainhead of our presence. This is what our heart needs to 'serve' or be connected to. When we connect to presence, we remove the control of fear. It doesn't mean that whatever difficulties are facing us simply vanish away, but it does mean that we no longer feel frozen or embedded in them.

The Grail Castle, which is a symbol of our own psyche, is home to another king as well. This king is called the Wounded King because of a wound that makes him a semi-invalid, constantly in pain. Moreover, this Wounded King presides over a wasteland kingdom - the vegetation is fading, the land is no longer fertile, but dried out and desolate. The wasteland condition of this kingdom is a reflection of its King's wound.

The Wounded King represents the fear driven self. This is the self that keeps us wedded to old ways of thinking and doing things, even when common sense or moral imperative dictate that we change. We resist change either because, as already mentioned, we feel powerless or are fearful of the disruption change will bring.

Sometimes we are personally invested, both in terms of our income and our prestige, in the way things are and so we don't want to change because we are putting our self-interest ahead of what is right (serving the whole). Greed often follows close on the heels of fear. Either way, the wasteland is what happens as a result of our inaction or misaction - the wasteland kingdom that always ensues when the wounded or fear-driven self is in charge.

The story of GM illustrates this syndrome. Despite commonsense and the innovations of their Japanese and European competitors, GM persisted in producing cars that were designed with no sense of social responsibility, whether in terms of gas efficiency, durability or the amount of materials used in their manufacture. This approach resulted in the wasteland of a 4 billion loss posted in 2005 and 30,000 redundancies (not to mention the pollution from higher carbon emissions).

The promise in the myth is that if the knights can find the grail and ask the question 'Whom does the grail serve?' the Wounded King will be healed and his wasteland kingdom restored. When we connect to presence, the fear-filled

identity disappears, and with it the wasteland - the rigid ways of thinking and the results they bring.

In fact what we discover is that the root cause of fear - the wound - is the separation from presence. At bottom, fear is the absence of something, the absence of our own presence. Although we usually don't realize it, the 'wound' of separation from our authentic presence also makes us feel vulnerable and spiritually hungry. And we tend to try to cover up and fill up this emptiness by deepening our connection to the world around - seeking whatever it is, money, relationship, status, power - to 'feed' the wound. But we are looking in the wrong direction.

At Camelot the grail served the knights a taste of what they most desired - their authentic presence. And this was something that could not be found 'out there', it came from the heart connecting to that presence.

Serving the Purposes of the Larger Order

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When our heart connects to our authentic presence we feel whole. The experience of wholeness is what we most desire - whether we realize it or not - and becoming whole is what the grail quest is all about. It is also what leadership is all about.

So far the myth has helped define leadership through presence in terms of how it manifests: the ability to stay fluid and in balance, to avoid bogging down in agenda or dogma, to perceive clearly what is actually present, to encourage input and draw out the intelligence of the collective. But as we enter the Grail Castle, and discover that the grail of our heart is designed to serve the Grail King, the symbolism starts to define leadership through presence in terms of its most intrinsic and far-reaching essence. No longer in terms of what it does, but of what it is - which is wholeness itself.

The Grail King symbolizes the presence, understanding, and awareness of wholeness, of *the* whole: an energy or dimension of self that is both personal to us and much larger than us. A king always has a kingdom. King Arthur's kingdom is the newly united Britain; a president's kingdom is the nation he represents; a CEO's kingdom is the company he heads up. The Wounded King's kingdom is the wasteland; and the Grail King's kingdom is the whole, as in the whole thing, everything, manifest and non-manifest. What Lao-tse called the Tao, what David Bohm called the fundamental order.

The point is that this kingdom of the whole *includes* all the other, lesser kingdoms and when our heart 'serves' the Grail King, it means that we serve the purposes of this larger, deeper whole, as well as or by means of the smaller kingdoms we are responsible for. This means that we cannot operate in a way that is solely out for ourselves or even for our company. Personal or corporate gain cannot be our sole aim.

Wholeness is the condition of being connected to the whole, both in the sense of being in step with its underlying rhythm and in the sense of being informed about the existing realities in which one is operating. Clearly a political or business leader must develop the acumen to synthesize enormous amounts of information and the skills to manage the complexities of their 'kingdom'. But the material factors and the facts and figures based on them comprise only one aspect of what I am calling the whole - which is why policies based on these things alone are not always very effective. The other aspect of being connected to the whole is the more intangible sense of timing, of seeing what's next and includes a sensitivity to the contribution and insights of others. This more intangible quality of leadership combined with the necessary informed overview also contributes to a commonsense (that sometimes rarest of qualities) and perspective vision that is also essential to leadership.

It was the polar opposite of this approach, the combination of putting self and corporate aggrandizement ahead of what was good for the larger whole and an accompanying loss of perspective and commonsense that lay behind the excesses - and bankruptcies - of Enron, Tyco, Worldcom and others. The inability to accurately assess the larger context has also haunted American foreign policy makers. Vietnam and today Iraq are both very painful examples of the results of leadership that was seeing its own dogma rather than what was really there.

In a sense, wholeness is both what we serve and who we are. It is a matter of personal identity as well as a nexus to a larger order. When our hearts connect to presence, our very thinking and perceiving processes are moving in concert with the whole. This is something effortless, we don't have to make it happen. This synchronous movement obviously includes the other people in our worlds. Functioning in this way therefore is the central cog in the wheels of collective leadership because it means that we are connecting to people in our worlds at the meeting place of collective intelligence. The center of the table.

For this is the other, less literal, meaning of the round table - a condition in which we collectively author new direction. The knights sat around the table as peers with King Arthur. Leader and team had equal access to the center of the table. Each person in any particular field of endeavor brings their specific differentiation of the intelligence of the whole relative to their rank, roles and skillset. Their differences become the means of differentiating the process of the whole (as opposed to a source of conflict) because each one is moving in synchronicity with the whole:

"Doors open, a sense of flow develops, and you find you are acting in a coherent field of people who may not even be aware of one another. You are not acting individually any longer, but out of the unfolding generative order."

(from "Synchronicity: the Inner Path of Leadership"
by Joseph Jaworski)

All that is needed to let this collective work is for each one to go on the quest for the grail! In many ways, a leader's first order of business is to make this journey him or herself, and then provide the conditions that inspire and challenge the people who work with him or her to do the same. Learning to move with the whole in one's own consciousness is linked to the ability to let the intelligence of the whole be expressed through an organization.

Bringing the World Alive

The myth tells us that leadership through presence heals and brings alive our worlds. The rigid structures of iron and stone become a united, thriving kingdom; the wasteland turns into a living system. What is being symbolized here is not simply the ability to analyze accurately our selves and our circumstances, crucial though that is. Nor is it only the inner shift required in order to free up from fear even though this again is an essential act of leadership. It is something more proactive. It means that we bring the presence of wholeness, a force of energy that while it may seem intangible perhaps even negligible, is in fact the most potent agent for change. As Herb Kelleher, cofounder and chairman of Southwest Airlines, says: "Your spirit is the most powerful thing of all".

The implication is that the presence of wholeness itself is generative, it grows things. Collectively leading through presence multiplies this regenerative possibility. This generative quality could be likened to atmosphere - or climate. We are beginning to see some of the problems that occur when the climate changes, or goes out of balance. But when the climate, the collective atmosphere, is right, balanced, whole - everything works, everything flourishes.

Author of the non-fiction 'The Return of King Arthur' (Tarcher/Penguin 2004) and two poetry collections: 'Sea of Glass' (The Diamond Press, 1990) and 'To the End of the Night' (Northwoods Press, winner of their 2003 competition). In the UK, Diana worked with the Angels of Fire performance group, appearing in The Voice Box at the Royal Festival Hall. In New Hampshire she founded the state funded '3 Voices' three women writers who perform state-wide. She also runs workshops on the Arthurian myths and on poetry. Diana and her family are British, but now make their home in the US.